

Uncovering an Indiana Treasure . . .

The History of the Indiana State Museum



Looking around the Indiana State Museum, most people probably do not realize that they are walking into an institution that has existed in some form for over 130 years. In fact, many people in Indiana have never heard of the Indiana State Museum. Is it possible that it has really been around for that long?

Actually, the heart of the museum is a collection of things, and this is how the museum originally got its start. The current collection includes all types of things: clothes, fossils, cars, paintings, minerals, toys, etc. The original museum's collection was started in 1862, during the Civil War. State Librarian R. Deloss Brown began collecting minerals and other curiosities, which he kept in a cabinet. In 1869, the Indiana General Assembly recognized this collection by passing a law requiring the collecting and preserving of examples of Indiana's natural history. A state geologist was assigned to the task of labeling and organizing the collection. He became the first employee of what would become the Indiana State Museum.

This natural history collection quickly developed beyond the legislature's original intent when hundreds of cultural items, particularly relating to the recent Civil War, were added. Soon the collection was a "museum" of sorts, with a hodge-podge of curios and specimens. There was little professional guidance with this early bunch of artifacts, and the attitude was to accept anything that was donated.

In 1888, the museum's collection was put on display in a spacious room in the third floor of the State Capitol building, but it didn't remain there for long. It was frequently moved from room to room until 1919, when the collection was sent to the most inhospitable place, the basement of the State House. It would languish in this location for almost 45 years, completely closing once in the late 1920's and again in the early 1960's. This era marked a long period of neglect and abuse that would haunt the museum and its collection for many years.

The basement displays and storage areas in the State House were a poor place to house museum artifacts. It was a dark, dirty place and was unattractive to museum visitors. The exhibits were badly arranged, poorly labeled and some were housed improperly. Also the area was susceptible to vandalism and was frequently subjected to damage from water, humidity and insects. Numerous objects from the collection completely disappeared or became unusable while being stored there.

In 1945, important steps were taken toward the establishment of a new and modern state museum under the administration of Governor Ralph F. Gates (1945-1949). Staff members who knew how to care for artifacts and

operate a museum were hired. Studies were made of possible sites for a new museum building and designs were created. Philanthropist Eli Lilly, excited by the prospect of a professional-quality museum of Indiana heritage, donated the ground on the northwest corner of Ohio and Senate Streets to the state. Unfortunately, the plans fell through, probably due to the \$3.5 million price tag.

In 1958, during the administration of Governor Harold W. Handley (1957-1961) the legislature authorized a commission to examine the state museum. They recommended the construction of a building on the site originally proposed by the Gates administration. The commission reported that its members had “been forced to the reluctant conclusion that Indiana has the poorest and most inadequate State Museum in the United States.”

Sadly, this report was largely ignored. It wasn't until 1962 that Governor Matthew E. Welsh (1961-1965) approved the resumption of the planning for a new state museum, but with totally different tactics. The Indianapolis City Hall, located at 202 North Alabama Street, became vacant in 1961. The state and the city worked out an agreement for the museum's use of the building. The structure was to go under massive renovations to prepare it for a museum at a cost of approximately \$830,000. In 1967, the first real home of the Indiana State Museum opened its doors. The museum had four floors and a basement in which to develop exhibits, store and preserve collections and provide office space for its staff.

The new building gave the museum the push it needed. In 1969, the Indiana State Museum Society (now the Indiana State Museum Foundation) was established to provide a private, fund-raising support organization. In 1970, the Indiana State Museum Volunteer organization was established to provide support to the small museum staff. By 1976, the museum had received accreditation from the American Association of Museums.

As years passed, the museum's collection grew and grew. Donations from Hoosiers and those who had Indiana ties increased the number of artifacts tenfold. Soon the old City Hall was looking very small as outside storage areas were used to house portions of the museum's collection. Office space for some of the staff was located in nearby buildings, and once again there was a need to look for a bigger and better place to house the Indiana State Museum.

Proposals were made in the late 1970's and mid 1980's for a variety of additions to be constructed on the existing facility. Some involved purchasing nearby buildings, and others involved creating brand new facilities - some several stories high - that would connect to the old City Hall building. However, like before, the museum seemed to be last on everyone's list for a new facility.

In 1984, the museum's board voted to move to White River State Park. The White River State Park Commission, officially created in 1979 by the Indiana General Assembly, was taking an area that once held deteriorating factories, unused buildings and the dismal Central Canal and was transforming it into a cultural Mecca. Starting in 1988 with the opening of the new Indianapolis Zoo, several other institutions would follow suit and open or relocate to brand new facilities located within the park.

Finally, the Indiana General Assembly appropriated funding, and it was under the administration of Governor Frank O'Bannon (1997 – 2003) that the Indiana State Museum saw the start of a building that they could truly call their own. Groundbreaking ceremonies were held on August 30, 1999. The building, designed by Ratio Architects, an Indianapolis firm, was constructed from Indiana materials. The structure includes a three-level 130,000 square-foot museum with exhibits designed by the New York firm, Ralph Appelbaum Associates. There is also a four-level 100,000 square-foot administration/collections building that houses state of the art conservation labs, artifact storage areas, and office space for staff. A two-story gift shop, two restaurants, and the 40,000 square-foot IMAX Theater complete the amenities in the new facility. The building and the expense of the design, a total of \$65 million, was paid for with public funds while private funds were used to create and endow the exhibits at a cost of \$40 million. When the new building opened on May 22, 2002, the Indiana State Museum, once a neglected and forgotten little institution, finally received a very nice place to call home.